

America's top medical experts set the record straight

# MYTHS VS REALITY Arthritis

It's one of America's most common disabilities. And it's *not* caused by cracking your knuckles.

**A**rthritis is one of the most common causes of disability in the United States. An estimated 46 million Americans have arthritis, and that number is predicted to grow to 67 million by 2030, according to Dr. John H. Klippel, president and CEO of the Arthritis Foundation ([arthritis.org](http://arthritis.org)). We asked him to clear up some of the most commonly held myths about arthritis.

**MYTH: Only old people get arthritis.**

**REALITY:** It's true that older people get arthritis, but even children can get it. Two-thirds of arthritis patients are younger than 65, and some of the most serious forms of arthritis occur in teenagers or people in their 20s or 30s. Arthritis has an impact on the entire family because it's a chronic disease; people live with this forever. It affects one's ability to perform at work and doesn't allow a child to be a child, a parent to be a parent or a grandparent to be a grandparent.

**MYTH: There's not much anyone can do to combat arthritis.**

**REALITY:** We need to debunk that myth because there are so many things that can be done. First, we need to know what kind of arthritis the person has. There are more than 100 different forms of arthritis, which means there are more than 100 different ways to treat it — from physical therapy to pool exercise to medications — so it's very important for people to see a doctor to learn what kind of arthritis they have and how it is best treated.

**MYTH: Cracking your knuckles causes arthritis.**

**REALITY:** When children crack their knuckles, Grandma might say, "Stop doing that or you will get arthritis!" Even though the habit may be irri-



tating, I don't know of any evidence that suggests that cracking one's knuckles actually can cause arthritis.

**MYTH: People with arthritis can predict the weather by how their joints feel.**

**REALITY:** People say arthritis sufferers are very good at predicting a storm or whether it's going to rain. Is it true? I don't think we know. I can tell you we don't understand it. A related myth says that people with arthritis do better in a warm climate. We don't understand that, either. What we do know is that activity and fitness are very important to a person with arthritis, and it might just be easier to be active in a warm climate.

**Dr. John H. Klippel** is president and CEO of the **Arthritis Foundation**, which is based in Atlanta. He also is the author or co-author of nearly 200 publications and textbook chapters related to arthritis.



**MYTH: Exercise only makes arthritis worse.**

**REALITY:** I was taught that, but it's not true. The most important thing we can do is to encourage people to walk. That helps build muscle strength and maintain stability of the affected joint. It's a great way to slow the progression of arthritis. And, believe it or not, it's a great pain reliever.

**MYTH: Professional athletes will get arthritis in old age.**

**REALITY:** That's not a given. But it's true that overuse (at a professional or performance level) can cause joint injury that may set the stage for arthritis. Still, the last thing we want to do is to discourage people from playing football or being ballet dancers.

**MYTH: Excess weight doesn't affect arthritis.**

**REALITY:** One of the ways people can protect themselves from getting arthritis or keep it from worsening is to lose weight. In fact, the fascinating Framingham Knee Osteoarthritis Study says that if the average overweight person loses 10 pounds, he'll cut by half his risk of developing osteoarthritis in his knees.

**BOTTOM LINE:** In the last decade, there have been so many advances in our understanding of arthritis that people should be very optimistic not only about the present but also about the future. ●